

Accessing Assistance Maiduguri Workshop Report
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Introduction

Humanitarian access in the conflict-affected states of northeast Nigeria has been highly constrained since the start of the current humanitarian response in 2016 and it is a hugely challenging operational environments for aid organisations.

Humanitarian Outcomes facilitated a workshop in Maiduguri on February 12th 2020 drawing on work over the last 5 years exploring access issues in highly insecure places. The Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme (HIEP) of DFID funded the [Secure Access in Volatile Environments](#) (SAVE) research programme which explored how humanitarian aid is delivered in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria and follow-up funding for further dissemination of HIEP findings. An ongoing USAID funded [research programme](#) that has included a survey in northern Nigeria and will be conducting further surveys in the Central African Republic and Afghanistan. A [Nigeria report](#) was published in January 2020.

The workshop had a particular focus on the ability of people to access services and assistance. OCHA defines humanitarian access as a two-pronged concept, comprising:

- Humanitarian actors' ability to reach populations in need
- Affected populations' access to assistance and services

This definition explicitly frames access around both the ability of organisations to be present and to reach people and the ability of people to get the help that they need. In practice, however, most of the literature and most guidance focusses on aid organisations' ability to reach people. Starting with the populations access to assistance, protection and services shifts the lens of access debates to be more about the ways in which people affected by disasters could best be supported to receive the help and services they need safely.

The workshop explored what is known about this issue in North-east Nigeria, whether there are key gaps in knowledge and what a shift in focus could mean for how agencies approach programming, advocacy and protection strategies. It was attended by 45 staff from international and national aid agencies. What follows is a note offering personal reflections on the discussion and the key issues rather than a conventional report of what was said.

The Access Challenge

The access challenge in north-east Nigeria can be helpfully divided into 2 categories. Most challenging are the needs of people in inaccessible areas. REACH presented their most recent December 2019 report on Hard to Reach areas which makes clear that little or no assistance is reaching people and that crisis coping strategies suggests critical unmet needs. Assistance is, however, reaching large numbers of people largely in garrison towns.

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Reaching inaccessible populations is currently providing impossible for humanitarian actors given the refusal of any sides to the conflict to countenance negotiations. Any progress on unlocking this impasse will clearly need to involve higher level strategic engagement beyond the Maiduguri level and that is an urgent priority.

The workshop, however, focused more on barriers that people face in accessing assistance where it can be delivered and ways that aid agencies might be able to better tackle those barriers. Agencies, work on these issues on a day to day basis, trying to ensure that aid is effectively and accountably provided. However, in terms of analysis, policy and evidence this was seen as a neglected dimension of the access challenge.

The access working group and agencies have been primarily focused on trying to tackle the security, logistical and bureaucratic barriers faced by organisations. The question of the barriers faced by people themselves in accessing assistance has been given less attention. The mindset shift involved in focusing as much on peoples' ability to access services and get help with basic needs is one that would need an ongoing focus beyond a single workshop.

Key Issues

Getting beyond the agency – The current focus on access has an organizational focus – how can organizations reach people with aid and protection services? A focus on barriers people face implies a shift to thinking as much about advocacy as about implementation, in ways that cut across organizational and sectoral boundaries and require collective influencing. For instance, peoples' access to land emerged in discussions as a critical issue across several sectors. It also implies looking beyond aid to other ways in which people are making a living, accessing services and receiving support. That might, for example, imply the health sector engaging with private pharmacies, a focus on the value and costs of remittances, constraints and enablers to mobility and being able to move to find work and issues of pay, working conditions and exploitation in casual labour.

A focus on the way in which people are making a living and accessing services might also help to unlock ideas for progress on reaching inaccessible populations. Analysis of actors who might be present or able to have some access such as traders, polio campaigns, local councils and community leaders might suggest possibilities for getting help to people through interlocutors in ways that could then attempt to be negotiated. The latest REACH monitoring suggests that people in hard to reach areas do have access to land for cultivation and are mainly relying on their own production suggesting that options to support production could perhaps be explored.

Analysis and Evidence – Greater understanding of the barriers that people face in accessing services and assistance is needed. Again, this needs to look beyond individual organisation's programmes to encompass the full range of actors involved in providing services and assistance. In particular, it would be useful to have more granular analysis of the role of other actors especially government that gets beyond assumptions of absence and incapacity.

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More evidence is also needed about the costs to people of accessing services and assistance. The extent of harassment, exploitation, informal taxation, diversion, corruption and charges that people face remains unclear. The recent Humanitarian Outcomes survey showed significant numbers of respondents who perceived that the biggest obstacle to aid was that, 'local authorities took it'. Workshop participants also highlighted the need for more information on the role of 'gatekeepers' and community representatives in mediating access to aid and targeting.

Links to AAP and Protection – Much of this needed understanding should be available through accountability to affected population efforts. However, we heard in the workshop that progress on implementing an agreed AAP strategy and on more collective approaches to AAP had been limited. That means that AAP efforts still often sit at the agency level and aren't being clearly linked enough with collective efforts around access and advocacy.

There are also clear links between a people focused approach to access and protection. Many of the barriers that people face such as lack of documentation, harassment and exploitation are protection related. Again, there was a perceived need for stronger linkages between the work of the protection cluster and that of the access working group.

A response that had successfully taken forward a centrality of protection approach and stronger collective approaches to AAP would go a long way to identifying and finding solutions for barriers to access for populations that can be reached.

Land – Land issues and the availability and quality of land available to displaced people were highlighted at the workshop as a critical dimension of barriers to assistance across several sectors including food security, WASH and shelter. Land ownership and tenure, town planning and rental markets are always highly complex, particularly in rapidly growing urban settings and this could be an area that would benefit from a greater cross-sectoral focus, stronger collective advocacy and more analysis.

Communication and Language – As part of a revamped approach to AAP and emphasis on greater participation of people across the programme cycle, more investments in communicating more effectively with people particularly in local languages and through non-written means was highlighted. Translators Without Borders was mentioned as doing strong work in this area.

More engagement with other actors – In shifting from an agency to more of a people focused lens, there may be scope to engage more effectively with a wider range of government and local civil society actors. For example, in relation to cash and voucher based programmes, participants highlighted scope for stronger links to be built with Chambers of Commerce and key traders and vendors to enable markets to be better able to respond to demand. A group looking at protection raised the example of working more effectively with the Civil Registry Office to improve access to critically needed ID cards.

Leadership and Support: As in the interviews carried out for the Humanitarian Outcomes study, people highlighted the need for stronger leadership at the national level on strategic approaches to access, particularly for inaccessible populations and in critical areas such as

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land where the problems are well known but it is hard to make progress without more senior level advocacy.

There may also be scope for more investment in training and skills in key areas related to access such as humanitarian negotiation skills and learning from access strategies in other contexts.

Conclusion

The two-pronged definition of access implies the need to work on both parts. There continues to be a critical need for strong leadership in supporting humanitarian actors ability to reach populations in need and important work to be done on advocacy in relation to logistical, political, security and bureaucratic obstacles to the access of aid agencies. In particular renewed and continuing efforts are needed to try and find ways to break the deadlock that is preventing any assistance getting to people in currently inaccessible areas.

But these efforts could usefully be complemented by more of a focus on peoples' ability to access services and reach assistance and the barriers they face in doing so. Linking closely with protection and AAP efforts to better understand and evidence what those barriers are and to identify collective approaches to advocacy with military and government actors at all levels might help to improve peoples' ability to get the help they need to alleviate suffering and save lives.